

Department of Communications is not one of high priority for ANC Presidents: Phumzile Van

Damme MP, *DA Shadow Minister of Communications*

Honourable Chairperson,

This year marks the fifth and final year of this fifth Parliament.

As I look back on the work of the Communications Portfolio Committee, I see great improvement.

Improvement that has been as a result of a commitment to the discharging of our duties as public representatives of this august House.

I can proudly say that as South Africans from across political parties, we have done our best to conduct oversight over the Department of Communications.

This is not to say we have not disagreed along the way, we have, and have done so often.

However, what has always remained was our commitment to fixing the problems in this portfolio.

I unfortunately cannot say the same for members of the Executive who have been in charge.

The last three years have been an exercise of utter frustration.

Today before us we have the fourth Minister of Communications in two years, the second in the space of six months, and the tenth since 2009.

The constant reshuffling of Ministers means that there is perpetual policy uncertainty and a lack of continuity.

It is quite clear that this department is not one of high priority for ANC Presidents.

And less of a priority is South Africa's Broadcasting Digital Migration programme.

Only R77 million has been allocated for its roll-out this year, whereas R6.6 billion is actually what is needed.

It is quite clear that another year will roll on by, and South Africa will not migrate to digital television.

In the meantime, technological advancements have sped by while South Africa still debates encryption.

It is clear that an in-depth review of government's Broadcasting Digital Migration programme is needed and needed urgently.

I would suggest that the R77 million allocated to the process be put towards assembling a panel of experts in the field to start the process afresh, taking into consideration the technological developments in the sector.

It has been a worry for some time that the department has over the last number of years held numerous "public awareness campaigns" to promote digital migration, a process that it must have known for some time would not happen.

I was amazed to discover via reply to a parliamentary question that R30.3 million has been spent on these campaigns, which, according to some attendees, were sometimes nothing more than campaigns to promote the ANC. At each campaign a whopping R2 million is spent on food alone.

Interestingly, the amount spent by the department on travel and subsistence doubled in the lead up and during the 2016 election, when numerous of these public awareness campaigns must have taken place.

Until there is some clear direction around digital migration, these imbizos must be stopped, and the money budgeted for them, diverted towards the department's core mandate, which is to develop national communications policy.

The lack of innovation and forward-thinking in this department is embarrassing.

To date, we have had no response from government regarding the protection of personal information online, and the phenomenon of fake news which threatens our democracy.

The EU, for example, has created a commission to propose measures to tackle fake online news, including an EU-wide Code of Practice on Disinformation.

The Code is anticipated to include a series of aims to help tackle the spread of fake news, including:

- Ensuring transparency when displaying sponsored content;
- Enabling third-party verification;
- Clarifying how algorithms work; and
- Introducing additional measures to identify and close fake accounts.

The Department of Communications must look at international best practice in order to be at the frontline of responding to communications technological developments and threats.

Regulation must never lag behind technological developments.

Now regarding the entities reporting to this Department, it is astounding that Rubben Mohlaloga to this day remains the Chairperson of Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA), despite have being found guilty of defrauding the Land Bank of approximately R6 million.

The Deputy Minister of Communications, Pinky Kekana is on record on 27 March 2018 stating that Mr Mohlaloga would be suspended.

Here we are 6 weeks later, and a convicted fraudster continues to draw a salary and chair a chapter 9 institution.

Pending the conclusion of parliamentary processes, Mr Mohlaloga must be suspended immediately.

It is unconscionable that he continues to Chair the ICASA Council.

We are pleased that ICASA's is forging ahead with plans to open up the pay-TV market to create competition and provide more choice for consumers.

It cannot be that Multichoice dominates the market, closing out competitors, especially regarding Sports Rights.

As I discovered in a reply to a parliamentary question, over the last 3 years, the SABC has paid Multichoice over half a billion for Sports Rights.

Sports Rights which meant that South Africa's football fans, for example, have to watch delayed matches on SABC.

It cannot be that the public broadcaster has to pay a private company for the benefit of broadcasting sport matches, especially those of our national teams.

The public should be able to watch Bafana Bafana, the Springboks and the Proteas on the public broadcaster without the SABC having to pay billions to an intermediary for the benefit.

I am also pleased that the SABC is pursuing the issue of ICASA's "must-carry" regulations, which mean that its channels SABC 1, 2 and 3 are given for free to DSTV.

This means, that DSTV is able to gain advertising revenue from the SABCs channels, and it is dololo for the public broadcaster.

DSTV must pay the SABC for its channel. And the SABC should use this money purchase and commission better content, attract more viewers and in turn, advertisers and revenue.

Regarding the Films and Publications Board (FPB), we have expressed our unhappiness with the FPB amendment bill, with which material issues of constitutionality and enforceability remain. We hope the National Council of Provinces (NCOP) will be able to iron out these issues, otherwise if passed, the Bill is likely to be subject to litigation.

Chairperson, we have also expressed our unhappiness with the manner in which the dismissal of the former CEO of the FPB, Themba Wakashe was handled by the board.

The FPB spent R350 000 on initial legal advice from Bowman Gilfillan which, told them that they do not have a case against Mr Wakashe. Further legal advice and an investigation at a cost of R499 000 by Sekela Xabisa was ordered by the board which came to the same conclusion. The CEO was eventually awarded a settlement amount of R2.1 million because the board clearly wanted him out, allegedly for reasons, which may have included homophobia.

The waste of public money in this matter cannot be tolerated.

The board members of the FPB, especially those who agreed with the manner in which Mr Wakashe was dismissed, must personally, individually and severally be held liable for this fruitless and wasteful expenditure. They must pay back the money.

Honourable Chairperson, these are but a few of the issues that exist not only with the department, but the entities reporting it. I do not get a sense of urgency or an appetite for innovation from the ANC, or its Ministers to bring about real change to this portfolio.

It is quite clear that the only time that this portfolio will deliver to South Africa what it must is when we have Total Change in 2019.

A DA government would ensure that all entities are well run, those that need to be sold off, are sold, that crooks are not allowed to lead boards, and that the innovation necessary in the digital era is front and centre of its policy-making.

We wish Minister Mokonyane well for as long as she is with us. With the ANC, you never know when a reshuffle is coming.

I thank you.